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4 Years Late, Argentina Honors Its Nobel Winner

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Argentine Adolfo Perez Esquivel was welcomed into his country's embassy here last weekend for the first time in his life.

Not long ago the diplomatic doors would have been closed to him and many of his government's envoys would sooner have denounced him than shared a room with him. But this time he was the honored guest at a reception.

Perez Esquivel, the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize recipient who seven years ago was detained for 14 months in Argentina, appeared not to give much attention to the symbolism of the occasion.

"Logically they represent my country. As an Argentine, I have a right to be in my house," he said in an interview, shrugging his shoulders. "This should be normal."

But despite the recent transition in Argentina from military to civilian rule, there is a "museum of subversion" in an Army barracks that features this man whom some have called simple, almost childlike in his understanding of good and evil. A propaganda film there shows a crowd of demonstrators while the narrator explains that international subversion is still trying to infiltrate Argentina. Someone in the crowd is circled on the screen. It is Perez Esquivel.

Perez Esquivel completed a visit here last weekend sponsored by the Washington Office on Latin America and Amnesty International. He came to talk about torture, to warn against American involvement in Central America and to tout what he sees as the unconquerable spirit of *el pueblo*—the people.

He continues his work for the Service of Peace and Justice, an organization he founded in 1973 and which is helping the impoverished Indians in Central America form community farms and educational programs. An itinerant campaigner, he gives speeches around the world, skipping Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay and Poland, where he is still forbidden to go.

On Oct. 13, 1980, few in Argentina had heard of Perez Esquivel, a sculptor, or his organization, which spread a notion of nonviolent resistance to dictatorship taken from Gandhian and Christian teachings. On that day he was plucked out to take a place beside Mother Theresa and Andrei Sakharov, previous recipients of the award.

His nomination outraged the military, who considered him a subversive, and disappointed other human rights activists who had risked more and lost more in their fight against the dictatorship. Perez Esquivel had been in jail when the repression in the streets was at its most severe.

The military government waited two days before taking note of the award, and then the news media it controlled were restrained in their reporting. An American journalist in Buenos Aires at the time reported a newscast that pitched the story like this: "The Argentine architect Adolfo Perez Esquivel today was awarded the Nobel prize for peace—and speaking of peace, there are serious problems between Iraq and Iran. . . ."

The government's official reaction was more direct: Perez Esquivel's work was "effectively used, regardless of his intentions, to make the movements of members of various terrorist organizations easier."

There are two theories about why he was chosen by the Nobel committee. First is that his organization worked closely with Betty Williams Perkins and Mairead Corrigan of Northern Ireland's Peace People, who had won the award in 1976. The second is that his nomination was a message sent to the military by the international community.

"There are other people who did much more," said Robert Cox, former editor of the English-language Buenos Aires Herald, who left Argentina under threat in 1979. "If you could have chosen the most humble person, though, you would have chosen him."

According to some who have observed his activities, Perez Esquivel in "cobwebs and rainbows," one said. He is noble personally but not good as a politician. His sculptures are dramatic, maybe even corny, figurines. He is not an intellectual. He represents, said one, Everyman.

A small man with a rough voice and half a head of wanton hair, he dishes out political critiques and tackles the delicate subject of torture in almost one breath.

His seemingly good nature has not endeared him to everyone. Some accuse him of exploiting the fame that the Nobel Peace Prize brought him. Whether or not solicited, he frequently distributes his opinions on topical subjects to the international press in Argentina.

He admits that he is using his post-1980 fame for publicity. "The prize is an instrument to open up a new audience in Latin America. It allowed us to reach governments," he said over coffee last week. "Our effort is more intensive now."

Part of that effort involves a boat donated by Norway and Sweden and packed with supplies for the November elections in Nicaragua. Perez Esquivel and 20 prominent figures, including Dr. George Wald, a Nobel prize winner in physiology, are to leave Oslo on July 24 to sail through the port of Corinto, a target of U.S.-backed forces opposing the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The voyage was inspired by the mining of the port earlier this year by the CIA-financed forces.

"The mining of the harbor is a violation of international law governing free navigation and one of the most serious offenses," said Perez Esquivel. "If this incident is not clearly challenged, it will set a precedent. It could be used by the Soviet Union or anyone else."

He said the intent of the mission was to put the Nobel laureates in the same danger as the crews in the port, although the mining has ceased.

Perez Esquivel's troubles at home began in the spring of 1977, when he stopped in at a police station to renew his passport. The police, ap-